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VARICELLA CASES IN PINELLAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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A cluster of varicella, commonly called chickenpox, has been identified by the Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County (DOH-Pinellas) at a local school where eight students have been diagnosed with the vaccine-preventable disease, as of Jan. 26.

Per state statute, the location of the school and identifying information about the students in an epidemiological investigation are not shared. Parents at the school in question have been notified in writing.

Varicella is an acute infectious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). One of its forms is herpes zoster, or shingles; in children, primary varicella infection is called chickenpox. It is spread person-to-person or through contact with the fluid in the lesions on the person's skin.

There were 38 varicella cases in Pinellas and 743 in Florida during 2015. Pinellas cases have risen from 16 in 2012 to 38 at the end of last year.

A rash is sometimes the first sign of the virus in children. Those who are unvaccinated will have crusty lesions on the head, trunk and extremities in addition to fever and other complications. In children with cancer or HIV who already have immune-compromised systems, symptoms are more serious. Other complications may include infected lesions, pneumonia or even death. (Before the varicella vaccine was in use, 1 in 60,000 varicella cases were fatal.)

The varicella vaccine is administered to children as the combination MMRV (measles, mumps, rubella, varicella) vaccine or as two doses.

DOH-Pinellas continues to investigate the cluster and recommends that parents fully vaccinate infants and children at their healthcare provider's office or at a health department location. For DOH-Pinellas' locations and hours, go to <http://pinellas.floridahealth.gov/locations/index.html>. For immunization schedules, visit <http://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/immunization/children-and-adolescents/schedules-and-requirements/index.html>.

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